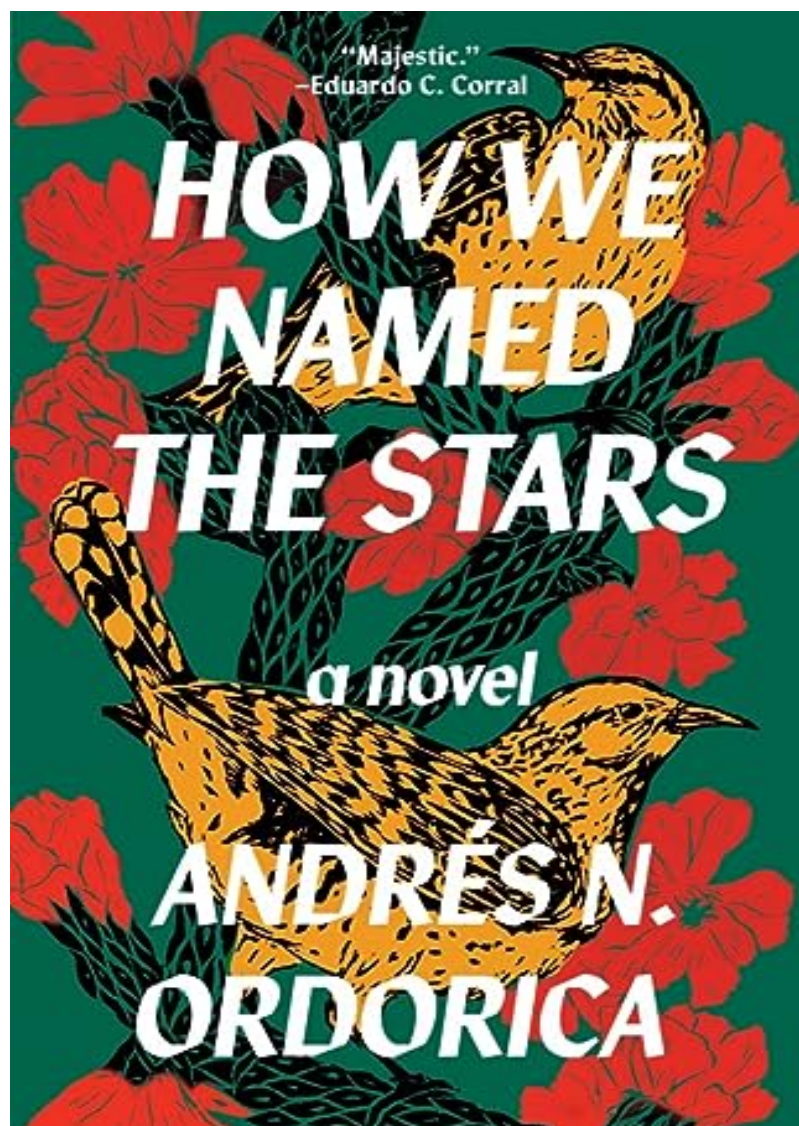


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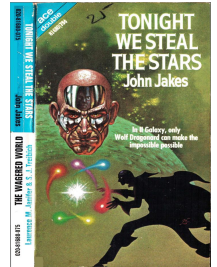


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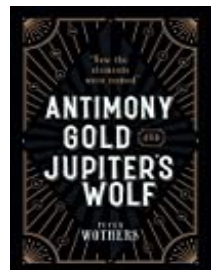
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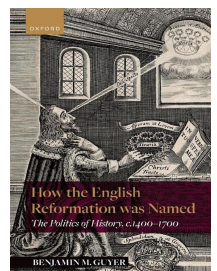
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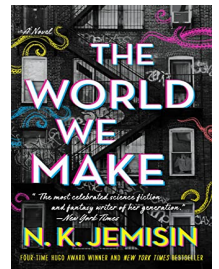
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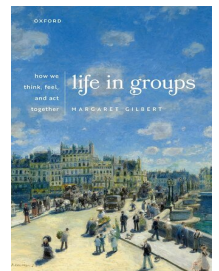
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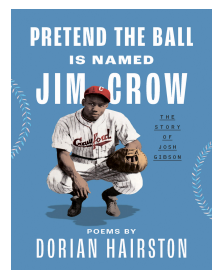
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"Majestic."—Eduardo C. Corral

HOW WE NAMED THE STARS

a novel

ANDRÉS N.
ORDÓRICA

HOW WE NAMED THE STARS

a novel

ANDRÉS N. ORDORICA



TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

For my grandfather Filomeno and for Serena.

VLADIMIR: Do you remember the Gospels?

ESTRAGON: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy.

—Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

HOW WE NAMED THE STARS

PROLOGUE

If you asked me, I'd tell you: Cetus, the sea monster—which would no doubt prompt questions charged with panic and intrigue. It's not a pretty myth, but I'd explain how the Aztecs knew the constellation as Axólotl. Perhaps, being native to México, that pink salamander with its sweet face would be more reassuring to you. The truth is, both origin stories are dark—scary, even. In the Greek myth, Princess Andromeda was offered up as a sacrifice for the monster Cetus to devour in hopes this act might bring an end to Poseidon's wrath. Xolotl, who inspired the lizard's name, was god of fire and lightning, a guide for the souls of the dead into the underworld.

If you asked me to explain why I chose this constellation to be yours—which of course you would, being you—I'd say that although darkness can be scary, it also can be profound. I'd say, *Imagine a blacked-out room, completely void of light. Now imagine striking a match. Although the room is mostly dark, full of so much unknown, it's also full of so much light.*

Even if you looked at me with a face that screams *You're certifiably insane*, I'd say, *See how inviting that single flame is, how brave it must be to burn brightly, even when alone in such darkness, even when it's faced with such pain.*

I'd say, *That's you.*

You'd no doubt protest, call me dumb, tell me to be quiet, might even say, *Please shut the fuck up*. You'd make some argument about how you're not bright enough to be a star, let alone luminescent enough to be a collection of them, enough to make up a whole constellation. But I'd counter this argument, pushing past your self-doubt. All my real feelings would pour out: you aren't just a constellation, you're a galaxy, a universe to me. But knowing you like I do, well, of course all this honesty would be too much. It would make you retreat, like a clam, and it would be a lot of work to get you to come back out of your shell.

But no matter these imagined protestations, I still see you as the god of fire. When I look at you, watching you in all our quiet moments, an electricity runs through my body, a spark that only you can bring about. Around the fire, orange-red flames bouncing off your copper skin, I imagine you as a bearer of light: someone who deftly moves between shadow and revelation, navigates both darkness and truth, holding those dark black eyes of yours shut—your hands snaking through the midnight air, your body aligning with the beat of your favorite song playing softly from a speaker. All I want is to be near you.

As the logs continue burning, smoke seeping into hair and clothes, I witness you at your brightest and fullest—the brightest and fullest you have ever been in the short time I've known you. Tonight, I want to tell you this. Tonight, I want to grab my camera, take a photo, and say, pointing to the screen, *This is you. Can't you see how I see you?* But I fear that rousing you from this moment of joy, from the comfort enveloping you, might break the spell. Between the fire and drink scattered around our feet, there is enough to keep you warm, but still I long to hold you close—long to offer up some of my body's heat. Perhaps it's the drink allowing these thoughts to unfurl,

or perhaps it's something that's been building for a while now. But I stay quiet all the same, letting the stillness of night take over, allowing you to dance freely under the October sky.

As you continue dancing, I hold the six letters of your name close to my chest. Looking up at the firmament, at these gods of vengeance who produced all this beauty around us, I begin to pray for you. I don't know who I'm praying to, but I pray you might remain in the light always, be this free, be this happy, that you might never know darkness. I then close my eyes, allow my body to sync with your movements, and whisper each letter, releasing them one by one into the night sky:

D

E

N

I

A

L

You're singing to yourself now, an almost mantra, and, I kid you not, I see lyrics buzzing around us like the letters I've let go of. Inching ever closer to your light, I join you. Together our movements grow more erratic, more urgent, as we move and shake with newfound purpose. Guided by something carnal, a yearning for truth and a desire to be our realest selves, the most honest versions. I will stay like this with you for a few more hours, dancing around this burning blaze just as man has done since the dawn of time. When he used to fall asleep under the stars, seeing them as nothing more than blank pages in which stories would unfold, in which myths and legends would be written.

PART I

DAY ONE

AUGUST 23, 1989

Sometimes I dream of another life, one in which leaving this town does not scare me. I feel a call inside me as deep as a canyon. Animal-like, instinctive and knowing. Often it comes in the form of silences. Like in the dark of night when I wander home alone, drunk from the bar, I will be walking under lamplight, kicking up the dust of the road, and I'll hear it. It brings me to a complete standstill. The voice will often tell me how there is something bigger out there. Something bigger than what I've grown up believing. But to get to where I need to go, I must be willing to face the unknown. With only the streetlamps as my witness, I call out to ask what that unknown is, but I never get an answer. The voice goes quiet, leaving me to wrestle with what I need to find.

—D.M.

Sam's dead.

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Those words have followed me for six weeks now, across borders and many time zones, over thousands of miles, and still they haven't shifted—the weight of their truth still very much bears down on me. I've spent most of today's first flight staring out the window, my mind returning to the weeks before we met, when we were nothing more than words shared online. All this traveling, these layovers, are starting to surface more and more memories; how our story began only twelve months ago, when I was making this journey for the first time, dashing around airports wondering what freshman year of college would be like. Now here I am, returning to Ithaca as an almost completely different person. But of course, you know that already.

Today, while traveling across this vast country, above cities and states I know nothing of, I thought about the night I answered that strange number only to hear your mom's voice, brought to me through telephone lines and satellites straddling man-made borders. As I heard her words, I retreated to our happy times, like when I'd spot you from across the quad darting between classes; the thrill of knowing you were happy to see me, how you'd run over just to smother me in a hug before darting off once more—it was safer there in our past than in my present.

Between her crying and frantic breathing, I didn't really put two and two together. I was too lost in the past, buoyed by all our adventures, hours of conversation, how I felt whole in your company. I couldn't hear what she was telling me, didn't want it.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie. I'm so, so sorry to have to tell you like this." Her tears poured through the phone, starting to flood me with sadness.

You're wrong, Martha, you're so wrong, I thought. But she wasn't.

"Sam's dead."

Please don't judge me, but after I heard those words I started to forget things almost immediately. It scared me, honestly. In the days that followed the phone call, all sorts of memories—big and small, important, superfluous—just started evaporating into the ether. As hard as I tried, I couldn't stop them. Time was working against me, and so I needed to work fast to remember what I still could.

What hurt the most was when I started to forget your voice, what it sounded like to hear you say my name aloud; started to forget how hearing you say my name was a way of seeing myself as I had never seen myself—someone free from how my family saw me—and how you gave my name new meaning, new weight. No longer was I my parents' son, my grandfather's nieto, the bearer of a deceased uncle's name. I was Daniel.

I was your Daniel, at least for a time.

It's strange to think we knew nothing about each other before moving in together. We had sent three, maybe four, messages over Facebook that summer, always straight and to the point:

What's your major? Where you from? Do you drink? They seemed essential enough questions for understanding what we were both getting into. I always responded promptly: *I'm Daniel. I'll be an English major with a hopeful minor in creative writing. I am from a small town in Northern California (you won't have heard of it).* A few hours later, you responded: *Nice to meet you, Daniel. I'm Sam, pre-med student. From SoCal – just outside Orange County.* Followed by: *I have a cousin in Sacramento – you anywhere near there?* I responded: *About an hour away in the middle of some farmland.* You sent a quick, LOL, *well nice to meet you – speak soon, bro.*

I remember being afraid of you before we met. I spent hours studying your strong jaw, golden shoulder-length curls, that perfect smile in your Facebook profile—all of it belonged to the face of a man I feared might reject me. Having never had many male friends, I didn't expect great things, and the fact that you were an athlete only added to my pessimism. You looked like all the guys who tortured me in the hallways of high school. I tried not to dwell on this fact too much in the lead-up to my arrival, but the fear was still very present. In my final days at home, I went out with friends to say goodbye, and all of them seemed thrilled at the idea of college on the East Coast, of dormitories and roommates. With each goodbye, I could sense their need to hear a boundless thrill in my voice, but all I could muster was mild optimism that it would all turn out okay, that you would be okay. That I might be wrong in my prejudgments was all I could hope for.

I arrived the day before you for an induction given to latecomers, those who hadn't already flown or driven to visit the University of Cayuga during the admissions process. The campus in Ithaca, New York, was like nothing I was used to, with its old brick buildings and white-columned entryways, bell towers and pristinely manicured lawns. All their colors overwhelmed me: those deep greens, copperish reds, and the crystalline-blue sky above the lake sitting in a basin below us. I had entered a world of privilege, and by day one was already doubting my ability to survive.

During this induction I met Rob and Mona, who, on that first day, also scared me. They had a confidence and worldliness that I lacked. Still, we stayed fixed to one another while being guided along by a campus rep pointing out fact after fact about our elite East Coast school.

"He is kind of hot, right?" Rob asked as we meandered side by side.

“The tour guide in the MC Hammer pants?” Mona asked. As she spoke, she was simultaneously checking out two Korean girls near the front wearing Chanel outfits and Miu Miu backpacks.

“Yeah, like in that kind of ‘I know I’m hot but I’m not going to make it a thing’ kind of way.”

“I wouldn’t know, Rob, I’m into girls. How about you ask him?” she said, pointing to me with barely any interest.

I was horror-stricken as Rob homed in on me, and immediately felt sweat trickling down my back. I hadn’t told either of them I was gay; how had Mona known? I thought about running away before Rob could ask for my opinion, disappearing into another tour group, never to speak to either of them again.

“What do you think, Daniel?”

“I . . . umm . . . well, he . . . seems *nice*.”

“Nice?”

“Yeah, like nice.”

Mona smiled at me before turning to Rob to say that “nice” was certainly a good quality to look for in a partner, but before she could go on, he cut her off to clarify that he was only implying he’d fuck the guy, not date him.

“I mean, come on, Mona. It’s like day one of freshman year. I’m not going to chain myself to monogamy straight out the gate. Don’t you agree, Daniel?”

“About what?”

“That, like, now isn’t the time to settle down. Now is the time to get some D, or V, or—” Rob looked at me. “I don’t know what you’re into, truth be told.”

“I’m not . . . quite . . . so experienced,” I said, praying that being frank would put this all to bed. However, the screams my words elicited from both Rob and Mona were so over the top that every person in our tour group, not to mention every person who happened to be on the quad just then, suddenly looked to us in either intrigue or annoyance.

“Shut the fuck up! Are you, like, a virgin?” Rob said, sotto voce.

“Yeah, but like, I don’t really want to talk about it,” I said. “It’s not like some weird religious thing or whatnot. I just . . . haven’t gotten around to it.” In many ways that was the truth.

“Hey, no shame, Daniel. It is 2011, for God’s sake. We need to be more sex positive as a society and not judge anyone no matter where they are on their journey,” Mona said. She had the fervor of a street minister, or a Tumblr influencer. “Right, Rob?”

“Totally—no shame, man.”

As we continued through the rest of induction day, I thought about where I was on my journey. In all honesty, I had no clue. But here I was grouped with these two loud, well-meaning but overly self-assured peers of mine, fearing what their questions had implied. Worse, what their understanding of me might be because of what they hadn’t seemed to need to ask. Had they read me as gay? And did that mean that you, or others I would soon meet, might read me as gay? These questions followed me as I made my way back to our dorm, praying sleep might bring comfort and clarity.

I awoke to complete stillness the following morning. Most students had yet to move in or were dead asleep after a night full of illegal parties I hadn’t dared join. In my bed, with the rays of sun through the window heating up my skin, I felt safe and well rested. I lay there taking in the quiet

views before me, and looked at the clock. It was 10:00 AM, far later than I had meant to sleep. Suddenly I heard voices and sat up very still, trying to remember if I'd locked the front door. I quickly dressed and exited my room, only to be met by three new faces sitting on the couch. You were exactly how I remembered you from Facebook. The other two were older, a man and a woman, possibly in their early fifties, well dressed, with features similar to yours. Your parents, I quickly realized. You smiled at me before getting up.

“Oh my gosh, hello, I'm so sorry, I must have missed my alarm.”

“Hey, dude, no worries. We just arrived.”

I stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to do.

“I'm Sam, by the way. Sam Morris. And these are my parents, Martha and Ed, or Mom and Dad, as I like to call them,” you said. When we shook hands, I felt every muscle in your long arm move with purpose.

“Daniel de La Luna. Nice to meet you all,” I said, nodding to you and your parents in turn, like someone interviewing for a job.

You had already brought in all your luggage, and your parents were taking you to run errands. It would save me a trip on the bus, so I gladly accepted when they invited me to join. I remember you were keen to get the shopping over with and so ushered us all out the door. As we zipped down through the city center toward Cayuga Lake, your mom began listing off all the things you'd need for your new college life. Your dad occasionally offered affirmations along the lines of “Yes, honey” and “Martha, what would we do without you here to set us right?”

You only half listened to her, instead focusing more on your phone. I tried to see what you were doing, who you were speaking to—a girlfriend, possibly. But when I glanced over, I saw you were just catching up on the

previous night's MLB games. With you busy on your phone and your parents deep in planning, I allowed myself to take in the outside views of the lake, the trees, the city, trying to position myself in this new world of mine.

Once at the shopping center, I struck out on my own, not wanting to infringe on your time with your parents, but was soon interrupted by my phone ringing. It was my mom, likely checking in as I hadn't spoken to her since arriving in Ithaca. My mind felt muddled, heavy with too much thought, and since I couldn't feign the positive hopefulness I knew she wanted to hear, I ignored the call and made my way to the toilets. It seems ridiculous now, but at the time I felt so alone in all these changes, changes I had brought about. I mean, I'd chosen to go to school on the opposite side of the country. I'd told everyone I could do it, told everyone it was my biggest dream, that I could not imagine anywhere else in the world for me, but I was already feeling like maybe it wasn't going to work out. A new life, a new home, a new roommate. What proof did I have it would be okay?

As doubt crashed down upon me, I rushed into a stall and sat on the dirty toilet seat, closing my eyes, letting myself be still for a few moments. I let my mind be transported back to senior year of high school, back to the day that specific letter came through the mail—the look on my parents' faces, the tears Abuelo cried, the joy of translating those life-changing words:

It is with great pleasure that we inform you, Daniel Manuel de La Luna, that you have been accepted into the University of Cayuga as part of the incoming class of 2015. You will be enrolled as an English major in the College of Arts & Sciences. Your acceptance

includes an unconditional offer of full financial aid for tuition fees as well as room and board (see further details below). We look forward to welcoming you in the fall . . .

We held hands and jumped up and down in our humble living room, St. Joseph on the mantle, a crucifix and painting of La Virgen de Guadalupe on otherwise sparse walls watching over us. The Holy Family, too, were basking in our jubilation as our eight feet clattered against the tile floor. In the reflection of the TV screen, I could see how free our bodies were that day of all the things chaining us to the ground. It wasn't just Daniel Manuel de La Luna who'd gotten into Cayuga, but my entire family.

When I opened my eyes, I felt less sad. For now, at least, reliving the memory had helped. I left the stall and washed my hands, then headed back out in the direction of Target, where I immediately proceeded to bump into your mom—or, more so, she bumped into me. She was trying to text you and not watching where she was going. I smiled nervously and apologized even though I hadn't done anything wrong. Though I thought she'd turn around and continue on her own, she began instead to walk around with me, offering running commentary in each aisle of the homeware section.

"Those towels are lovely. I have them in lavender in our downstairs guest bathroom."

"They do look nice," I said as diplomatically as possible, mindful of the eighteen-dollar price tag. "But I think I'll do a little price comparison before committing."

"Of course. So responsible," your mom said, impressed by what she perceived as maturity.

“Wish my son were more like you, Daniel. I swear Sam thinks money grows on trees. What else is on your list?”

“Just a few things. Trying to be sensible, you know, until, umm, my stipend kicks in.”

Your mom smiled sympathetically as she led us to the snack aisle, where she began building a small mountain of food—necessary, she said, because you had a voracious appetite. Eventually she coaxed me into adding a few things just for me.

“So, Mrs. Morris, did you go to college on the East Coast?”

“Please call me Martha, and, to answer your question, no. I went to USC and then Stanford.”

“California girl through and through.”

“West Coast, best coast, as they say,” she said, smiling again as we reached the end of the aisle. “And what about your parents, where did they go?”

“Well, actually, I’m a first-generation college student. My parents finished high school back in México but never got around to going to college as they had me quite young.”

“They must be so proud of you—the University of Cayuga no less,” she said, patting my shoulder. “Sam tells me you’ll be studying English.”

“Yes,” I nodded. My interest in English seemed, at least to me, to pale in comparison to the fact that she was a medical doctor.

“A man who loves the written word, brilliant—and what is your favorite book?”

“That’s difficult to say, but the book that made me want to study English was Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. I was so engrossed in it senior year . . . in Hester’s story. That a writer from over a hundred and fifty years ago

could move me like that . . . It just fascinated me, and made me want to explore literature even more deeply.”

“I hear the passion in your voice . . . I truly think Cayuga is going to be an amazing place for you to expand your horizons.”

“I hope so, ma’am.”

We had made our way to the cash register when she got a call from your dad. Apparently, you two had hunkered down in the food court to enjoy pretzels. She insisted I go join you and took what few school supplies I had managed to budget for before sending me away.

“No cash,” she joked, “and I get double points on every dollar when using my American Express.”

“Really, Martha, I can’t let you.”

“It’s nothing, Daniel. Trust me. My treat,” she said as the cashier started ringing her up.

I felt a pain in my side because in reality, it was not nothing. All this newness was so much to me, too much, but to survive the day, I knew it’d be easier to smile and say thanks rather than draw out the moment any further. I had no more fight in me. “I appreciate it,” I said as I left your mom to it, praying the whole shopping trip would soon be over.

“We didn’t know what to order, so we got one of everything,” your dad declared, proudly pointing to the table covered in every available flavor of pretzel when I arrived.

“And you think you’ll still be hungry for lunch later?” I asked.

“Daniel, here is something you need to know about my son: growing up, we called him the human garbage disposal. Food will never go to waste with Samuel in your life.”

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perceived a coil of spring, which ran from the trigger to one of the branches. Its blackness had hidden it from her eyes hitherto. The discovery made all clear. The cord had held the trigger forward in its usual place, acting against the power of the spring. Then, the burning of the string by the fuse had left the trigger unprotected against the pull of the spring, which, suddenly effective, had fired the rifle. The ingenuity of the scheme confounded the girl, as she sat staring at the evidences of treachery. Yet, in that moment of anguish, she was moved to murmur a prayer of thankfulness that the knowledge of her lover's character had come to her in time to save her life from misery and degradation as his wife.

After a long time crouched there in the tree, May bestirred herself slowly and clambered down, leaving the rifle as she had found it, with the bit of charred string hanging, and the spring holding the trigger pulled, as it had been at the moment of the shot. It did not occur to her that it might be wiser to carry away these proofs of attempted murder. Indeed, in that first understanding of the guilt of Masters, she was too distraught to think clearly. She could only feel the vicarious shame that was hers by reason of him to whom she had accorded her love. Nor did she just then speculate much as to the exact motive that had actuated the engineer. She took it for granted that he had been influenced to his course by motives of greed, as was the fact in the main. She supposed that he had thought the murder of Saxe Temple would cause a delay in the search, by which he might profit to the extent of finding the treasure himself. It did not occur to her that an older and more primitive passion than greed, even, one more savage, too, might have driven him on to the crime. In her horrified amazement over the deed itself, she quite forgot the jealousy that had sprung in her heart by reason of her lover's devotion to Margaret West. Yet, at that very moment, the man who had just striven in vain to redden his hands with the blood of a fellow creature, was with Margaret West in a bowered nook of the shore, pouring forth the story of his love in passionate phrases.

CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET VAULT

MAY passed a sleepless night, wearying her brain in a futile endeavor to see her path clearly. She felt that, for the sake of what had been, she could not bring herself to accuse Masters before the others, or even privately to his face. Yet, her manifest duty lay in some step that should prevent another effort by him. She was convinced that he would dare no more, when aware of the fact that there was a witness to bear testimony as to his guilt, and in this she probably reasoned justly. In the end, she decided to write him a note, informing him as to her knowledge, and warning him against further pursuit of his evil plans, or of herself. She would have the missive in readiness to hand to him on the occasion of his first appearance at the cottage.

When she had thus determined, it was time to dress, for the day was two hours old. As soon as she was clad with her accustomed nicety, she wrote the letter to the engineer, and then descended to breakfast, pale and wan, with heavy shadows under her eyes, but vastly relieved that, at last, she had reached a decision as to her conduct of the affair.

The letter thus prepared was not destined for delivery that day. Masters did not appear at the cottage. As a matter of fact, even his egotism was convinced of the sincerity and unchangeableness of Margaret West's rejection of his suit. He found to his despair and wrath that the girl was totally irresponsive to his most ardent pleadings. The disappointment to him was the keener because it was so wholly unexpected. The girl had shown pleasure in his society from the first, and he had anticipated an easy victory, despite his jealousy of Saxe. Nevertheless, she repulsed him with a finality not to be denied. His failure was the more exasperating to him by

reason of the fact that the cause baffled his every effort of understanding.

The truth of the matter lay in a paradox concerning magnetism. Masters possessed in an unusual degree the magnetism of sex. At the outset, Margaret had felt this, without in the least apprehending the nature of the attraction exerted on her. She attributed it rather to his handsome face and buoyant manner, allied with his undoubted cleverness. Later on, as the man's passion for her developed, this same force in him, which had charmed in its subtler manifestations, became offensive to her sensitiveness. Still without any suspicion of the cause, she felt herself repelled, where before she had been attracted. By so much the more as his desire waxed and was revealed, by so much the more he grew repulsive. In the end, he became altogether detestable to her, and in dismissing him she made her feeling plain.

So, Masters did not come that day to the cottage, and the note that lay warm on May's bosom was undelivered. Yet his dual lack of success in love and in murder did not suffice to quench the spirit of the man. Greed and passion inflamed his hatred of the rival who threatened to destroy his hopes. As he went from Margaret at her bidding, his brain was already busy with new schemes by which to possess himself of the miser's gold and of the woman he loved. The first step toward such consummation must be the death of Saxe Temple. He was furious against the fate that had saved his enemy at the first trial; he was determined that at the second there should be no escape.

The night following that on which the shooting had occurred, Roy Morton passed through an experience that afforded him grounds for apprehension, although he kept the affair secret for a time, in the confident expectation of making further discoveries without assistance from his friends.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when he suddenly awakened out of a sound sleep. He attributed this awakening to a subtle warning from his never-sleeping sixth sense. Nevertheless, it

is a fact that, in the course of an adventurous career, he had acquired the habit of sleeping very lightly, so that he might be aroused instantly by the slightest sound of an unwonted sort, and it is probable that, on this occasion, some noise disturbed him. Be that as it may, he abruptly found himself broad awake and listening intently.

There was no sound anywhere within the cottage. Through the open window came the rhythmic chant of myriad insects, the rustling of leaves caressed by the night wind—nothing more. Roy was inclined to believe that he had been aroused for no adequate cause. Yet, he was disinclined to dismiss the warning of his precious sixth sense without further investigation. He got out of bed, threw a bath-robe over his pajamas, and set forth on a tour of investigation. There was still some moonlight shining through the windows of the hall, by which he was able to assure himself that nothing extraordinary was visible, nor did he hear any unusual sound. He descended into the lower hall, and there, too, his examination failed to show aught amiss. He moved with great caution, in order to avoid giving warning of his presence to a possible intruder, and peered into the office and the dining-room. Everywhere, he found all in order. He betook himself finally to the door of the music-room, which he found almost closed, but not quite. He pushed it open with much care, and bending forward, looked into the room. On the instant, his eyes were attracted by a light that shone clearly against the east wall of the room. By this illumination, he perceived a man, who knelt, holding a pocket-torch in his left hand, while his right was thrust into an opening in the wall.

Roy Morton stared in unqualified amazement. For the moment, his interest was centered on the aperture in the wall of the room, rather than on the man who knelt on the floor before it, with his arm thrust into the recess up to the shoulder. In that instant, Roy was seized with the conviction that he had stumbled upon the treasure of Abernethy by means of a monition from his sixth sense, and his heart was filled with gladness, both for the sake of his friend's fortune thus at last secured, and for the sake of his own pride in

being the active agent in that consummation. He had no doubt whatever that the man crouched on the floor was Masters, though the face was unrecognizable in the shadow. He even suffered a little pang of jealousy that the fellow should have succeeded in discovering the golden treasury, while he and his friends had so signally failed. He comforted wounded vanity, however, with the trite reflection that all is well that ends well. It seemed, indeed, that the affair had now become simplicity itself, since there remained only to watch the operations of the thief, and ultimately to possess himself of the gold in his friend's behalf.

It appeared to the observer that the position of the man on the floor left him subject to great disadvantage under attack, and that, therefore, it were wise not to delay action. Roy desired to capture the marauder single-handed for the sake of his own greater glory. He had no question as to his ability to overcome the engineer in a hand-to-hand contest, despite the fellow's excellent physique. With the idea of taking his enemy by surprise, he pushed the door farther ajar, to make space for a leap forward. Notwithstanding his caution, the hinges creaked with a sudden, harsh noise, which crashed through the silence of the night. In the same second, Roy sprang.

At the sound of the opening door, the torch had clicked into darkness—there was the slithering of rubber-shod feet across the floor. As Roy came upon emptiness where had been the man, he heard the rustling of the drawn shade of a window. He saw dimly against the outer light the silhouette of the thief in the opening. Before he could move, it had vanished. He was after it with all speed, but, by the time he stood on the ground outside, he could neither see nor hear aught to give an idea as to the direction of the flight. He went forward blindly, moving here and there haphazard, pausing often to listen. There was no reward to his efforts, and, after a few minutes, realizing the uselessness of longer search, he returned to the cottage, where he entered the open window.

It was just as he dropped to the floor that a cheering thought came to Roy. The man had carried away nothing in his flight. At the

moment of the door's creaking, the hand had been withdrawn from the cavity within the wall, and it had been empty. Evidently, the depredator had been interrupted just when he had succeeded in coming on the secret place of the gold. As he realized this, Roy went forward quickly in the direction of the piano-lamp, found matches, made a light, and turned eagerly toward the recess in the wall. As he knelt in the place so recently occupied by that other visitor, there was light enough to see clearly, and he beheld the safe set behind the wainscoting. The steel doors stood ajar; the first glance showed that the receptacle was empty.

Amazement was Roy's dominant emotion for the first few moments. It gave place to chagrin. He strove to disbelieve the evidence of his eyes, but disbelief was impossible. The safe was empty. He thrust his hand within, and felt about carefully, even as the man had done—only to find nowhere so much as a scrap of paper that might have held a clue. The shock of the disappointment stunned him. For a long time, he sat before the opening in the wall, squatting motionless on his haunches, nursing a swiftly rising rage.

Roy stood up at last, with an ejaculation of disgust. Then, curiosity laid hold on him, and he began a careful examination of the vault's mechanism. He pushed the inner doors of steel shut, but without turning the handle to shoot the bolt. Afterward, he scrutinized the portion of the wainscoting that was swung outward to reveal the safe. He moved it to and fro, a little way slowly, finding that it was very delicately balanced, so that it responded to the lightest touch. He inspected the bolts with which it was fitted, and sought to understand exactly the method of their operation, but this persistently escaped him, notwithstanding his knowledge of mechanical appliances. It was while he was pulling at one of the bolts that the impetus of his effort sent the section of wainscoting into its usual place as a part of the wall. Roy tried to catch it in order to prevent its closing, but he was just too late. He tugged at a projection of the carving, only to find that the masked door resisted his strength. He realized that the bolts had been thrust into their sockets by some device automatic in the act of closing. Greatly

annoyed, he began a hunt for the secret spring by which the operation of the bolts must be controlled. In this he failed. Try as he would, the wainscoting rested there before him in an immobility beyond measure exasperating. He went over the entire surface with painstaking care, pressing or pulling at each hollow or projection, and always there was the same irritating lack of response. Roy, with his chin thrust forward belligerently, toiled on in countless futile experiments, only to confess defeat. He was worn with fatigue from the monotonous labor when at last a distant sound startled him, and he looked around, to discover that day had come. Fearful lest he be discovered there, he fled to his room, disgusted by the fiasco. For the first time in his life, he sneered at that delusive faculty, the sixth sense.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CLUE

TO THE astonishment of Roy Morton and May Thurston, this day also passed without the appearance of the engineer at the cottage. The girl, at first experiencing some alarm over this protracted absence, was afterward filled with relief, when it occurred to her that Masters was keeping away because he had finally abandoned his evil intentions. She felt convinced that the failure of his attempt to murder Temple had brought him to realization of the heinousness of his conduct. The thought afforded her great satisfaction, since it relieved her of any necessity for action against him. The change in the situation so cheered her that she accepted with animation Roy's invitation to walk, and the two passed a particularly agreeable hour in strolling through the woods, finding each topic of conversation charming, and almost forgetting that such an one as the engineer encumbered the earth.

There came another development in the evening, when the four friends were smoking and chatting, as was their custom after the ladies had retired for the night. They were in the music-room with Saxe at the piano, where he had been playing from time to time. Now, however, he had ceased, and rested motionless, with his eyes fixed on the sheet of manuscript left by Abernethey, in a wearisome wondering as to the message that might lie concealed within that bare presentment of the song of gold—as he had come to call the composition. Billy Walker had steadfastly maintained his belief that the clue to the treasure was hidden there, and Saxe was impressed by the idea, although his reason declared it folly.

Presently, Billy aroused himself from the luxury of the morris chair, where he had been communing with an especially black cigar, heaved himself erect with a groan, and crossed the room to the

piano. He stood for a little while in silence, staring down at the written page on the rack.

"What's that?" he demanded. He pointed to the three measures that stood alone at the head of the sheet.



[Listen]

The phrase to which Billy Walker pointed was scrawled in a fashion that was rather slovenly as compared with the remainder of the manuscript. Hitherto, in spite of the many times he had studied the manuscript, Saxe had given small heed to this fragment of writing, which preceded the song of gold. Now, however, at his friend's

instigation, he examined it with scrupulous care before he spoke. Then, he shook his head in discouragement, as he struck the notes on the keyboard.

"It doesn't mean anything, Billy," he declared.

"But what's it there for, if it doesn't mean anything?" the other persisted.

"Why," Saxe answered, "I suppose it's simply that the old man had some sort of an idea, and jotted down a note concerning it. You see, it's at the top of the page. He did nothing more with it. Afterward, he used the same sheet to write the gold song on. He was a miser, you know."

"Yes, I know," Billy conceded. "All the same, I think, in this instance, he would have been comparatively extravagant. I still believe that the bit there has some significance."

Saxe shook his head emphatically.

"It can't mean anything," he repeated, drearily. He was fast yielding to discouragement.

For a long minute the two were silent, regarding the manuscript intently, with knit brows. Then, of a sudden, Billy's rough voice boomed forth a question:

"Aren't there letters on a staff of music? What are the letters there?"

Saxe smiled, in some disdain.

"Much good may they do you!" he said; and his tone was sarcastic. "The letters are, B, E, D, A, C. Might be a word in Magyar, for all I know. It isn't from any language more common, I fancy."

Billy snorted indignantly.

"It's not altogether impossible that it should be a word from some language or other," he answered, stoutly. "But we'll investigate it more closely on an English basis first. Now, what—exactly—does

that Italian word mean, there over the music. And what's it doing there, anyhow?"

Saxe laughed outright at the utter simplicity of the question from the musician's standpoint.

"It's a word to guide the player in his interpretation," he replied. "It means that this particular phrase should be played with great slowness."

Billy pondered this statement for a time, then vented a lusty sigh of disappointment. Presently, however, his expression took on animation again, for curiosity had hit on a new point of interest.

"What are those two vertical lines doing there in the middle?" he asked, eagerly.

Saxe shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"They, too, mean nothing—absolutely nothing!" he exclaimed. "They're in the same class as 'Bedac'."

"According to my theory concerning this affair," Billy asserted with an air of dogmatism, "you are wrong in thus dismissing, one after another, the possibilities of the situation. Now, we have before us a manuscript, which is undoubtedly the work of the man who left this gold to you, if you could find it. He explicitly stated in his communication to you that the clue to the hiding-place was clear enough. You might infer, since the money was left you in this fashion, that the clue would be of a musical sort. He was a musician. Music was his one specialty. It is also your own specialty. It is, then, the most natural thing in the world to suppose that, in one way or another, music would play a chief part in this matter. Following the sequence of facts, we come next to one that follows logically in the line of argument. For we come upon a piece of music, which is in manuscript. It is actually, we are convinced, a piece composed by the late Mr. Abernethy. We have ascertained from his secretary that it is written in his own handwriting. Finally, we are sure that it is the only thing coming directly from him that there is in the house, which

offers by its individuality a possibility of having a cryptic meaning of the sort required by us in the prosecution of the search.

"I repeat my firm belief that in this page of music lies the clue to the late Mr. Abernethy's secret. If I am right, then any single character on this sheet may be of vital importance. You sneer at 'Bedac,' which at first glance seems gibberish, and nothing more. There remains the possibility, nevertheless, that it may have a meaning of prime importance to you. A fortune may depend on your learning the meaning of that word. Don't dismiss it after just one glance. Don't sneer at it—and those two vertical lines! You say, they are void of purport. The fact is that they don't belong there—from your musical standpoint. Well, they're there, notwithstanding. The late Mr. Abernethy put them there. Perhaps they stood for something to him, in spite of the fact that they don't to you. Anyhow, don't sneer at them—yet. Wait, at least, until you've really studied them. As far as our present knowledge goes, this paper must hold the clue. I tell you, it's worth working on—hard!"

The harsh, sonorous voice in this long harangue had soon cut short the desultory chat between Roy and David, who had listened almost from the beginning with attention, while smiling a little at the earnestness of the speaker in pursuing his argument.

"Well, Billy," David remarked, "you're the one to work out the problem on logical lines. You've told the rest of us often enough that we can't reason." The other two nodded assent, smiling cheerfully on the nonplussed oracle.

"I'm horribly handicapped by my ignorance of music," he confessed, wryly. Then, his rough features settled into lines of resolve, and his voice fairly roared in the echoing room: "But, by the Lord! I'll do it—I'll work that thing out, if I have to learn music first!"

There came a shout of laughter from the three; the vision of Billy Walker thus engaged was too ludicrous! Notwithstanding their merriment, there came no relaxation of the set purpose in the speaker's face. It was evident that he was wholly sincere in his

announcement. Indeed, no sooner had the mirth exhausted itself than he craved a first lesson.

"Tell me about the letters that are on the staff," he besought Saxe, who good-naturedly complied, with a smile still on his lips.

"Then, that's all the letters there are in musical notation," Billy exclaimed, when the instructor paused. There was distinct disappointment in his voice. "Only, A, B, C, D, E, F, G. That's bad. Yet there are two vowels, A and E, and E is the most important vowel." He fell silent, standing moveless before the piano, with his gaze fixed on the manuscript in a brown study. "Bedac!" he muttered, after a little; and Saxe, hearing, smiled again. "And those vertical lines!" he mused aloud. Saxe kindly volunteered some information as to the purpose served by bars to separate the measures. When he ceased, Billy propounded a question, which was an affirmation: "Then, there is a measure with nothing in it?"

"Oh, in a way!" Saxe replied. "Only, this isn't really a measure. It's merely a mistake the old man happened to make—that's all."

"Why isn't it a measure?" came the crisp demand.

"Because, if it were really meant for a measure, it would contain something, either notes or rests, or both."

"You may thank your lucky stars I'm not a musician," Billy declared, and he snorted loudly in contempt. "You're hide-bound, so to speak, by the technique of your art. Thank heaven, I have an open mind. Because the thing is different, you assert that it can't possibly have any meaning. For my part, on the contrary, the fact that it's different is just why I suspect it to be of importance. I give the late Mr. Abernethy credit for some cleverness. Also, I deem him to have been capable of a bit of originality. The manner of his will suggests that possibility, at least. If he amused himself by evolving a musical cipher, I'll warrant he didn't construct a mere tonic sol-fa—whatever that may be—which any piano-banger could sing at sight to this tune here. I've always thought that much knowledge of technique was deadening. Now, I know it. The critic knows technique perfectly; the

genius never does. Here, I'll take it. You'll do no good, muddling over it!" With this pronouncement, Billy Walker rudely leaned forward, and snatched the sheet of music from the rack, and stalked away with it to the morris chair, leaving Saxe well content with such ending of the inquisition.

It was a half-hour later. Saxe had joined Roy and David, and the three were talking pleasantly of many things as they smoked. Throughout the whole time, Billy had remained huddled in the easy chair, his cigar, unlighted, clenched firmly between his teeth, his fierce, shaggy brows drawn down, his little, dull eyes set steadfastly on the sheet of music, which lay on his knees. Occasionally, there sounded an unintelligible mumbling from his lips, or a raucous grunt of dissatisfaction. Then, with disconcerting abruptness, the scholar lifted his head, ran his hands roughly through the bristling, unkempt thatch of hair, and exploded into Gargantuan laughter.

The three regarded him in perplexity, smiling a little under the contagion of his merriment. He gave no heed to their questions for a full minute, but continued his rollicking mirth.

"Well, I've made the first step toward the treasure," he announced, at last. The rolling volume of his voice was more thunderous even than its wont.

Came a chorus of ejaculations and questions from the others, as they sprang to their feet, and crowded about him.

Billy waved his hand imperiously for silence.

"But it's only the first step, remember!" he warned. "The first step! And, incidentally, it proves that I was right about the value of this document." He flourished the music aloft, in a gesture of triumph.

"Tell us! Tell us!" was the cry.

Billy regarded his friends quizzically.

"It's only the first step that I have taken, remember," he admonished. "But, as Saint Augustine said, it's the first step that counts. The miser's gold is somewhere at the bottom of the lake."

There followed an interval of astounded silence. It was broken by Roy with an exclamation of bewilderment:

"But—" he began. Then, he halted in confusion. He had been on the point of saying something concerning the secret vault in the music-room, and had checked himself only just in time. The others, however, had given no attention to his utterance, and he sighed with relief. It had flashed on him that his own knowledge in a way corroborated the statement by Billy, inasmuch as he found the vault empty.

"How? How?" Saxe was clamoring; David added his insistence.

Billy Walker preened himself with all the pride of a great discoverer, as well he might.

"It was simplicity itself," he assured them. "It was only necessary for me to learn music, and the matter soon became clear." Saxe and the others fairly gaped at the naïve assumption on the part of their friend that, in five minutes, he had mastered the art, but they did not care to question his complacency just then. "Being unhampered by over-much technique," the oracle continued, with buoyant self-satisfaction, "I was able to investigate with an open mind, examining all the facts." He paused to grin exultantly on the expectant trio, and then resumed his explanation:

"I had before me two determined facts, which gave no information in themselves, but required perhaps only the addition of other facts to become significant. Now, observe this lone bit of music at the head of the page." He held up the sheet, so that the others could note the phrase at the top.



"The first fact of which I was possessed," Billy went on, "thanks to the tuition in music afforded me by Saxe, was this: that the letters of

the fragment are, B, E, D, A, C, in such order. At the outset of my logical examination, I attempted variations in this order, as offering the simplest solution of the puzzle. After some experimenting, I became convinced that the secret was not concealed in a changed sequence of the letters. Next, then, I set myself to a consideration of the second fact. This consisted in the knowledge that the bit of music contained a measure that was not a measure. That is to say, there was the marking of a measure by two vertical lines, but nothing in that measure, neither notes nor rests. This impressed me as of importance in all probability. The same fact that led Saxe to disregard it, led me to scrutinize it with particularity." Again, Billy paused, to allow his hearers a moment in which to meditate on the shrewdness of his reasoning. When he went on speaking, his voice carried a note of increased contentment:

"Above this measure that is no measure, this measure that is empty, I perceived a pointer, of a size sufficient even to have attracted the notice of my friend here, hide-bound in technique as he is—but it did not. The pointer directed attention straight to a letter—a letter placed exactly over the measure that isn't a measure because it's empty. That letter thus pointed out is L. It fitted very well into the blank place with the other letters. So, where before we had only, B, E, D, A, C, we now have, B, E, D, L, A, C." Billy ceased speaking, and surveyed the others happily.

"Well, why don't you go on?" David demanded, impatiently.

Billy regarded the questioner in genuine astonishment, tinged with contempt. His gaze darted to the other two, and, on realizing that they, as well, were still uncomprehending, he groaned.

"Non-rationalizing nincompoops!" was his candid murmur of reprobation. "Oh, well, I shall explain, if it be possible to your understanding," he said gently, with an assumption of infinite patience. "As you musical sharps are aware, the musical notation comprises only seven letters, namely——"

"Oh, never mind that!" Saxe cried. "We know!"

"Pardon me," was the retort. "You only know it as a matter of technical knowledge, not as a fact from which to reason. The point is that there's no K in the musical scale."

"Well?" The monosyllable snapped from Roy. His face was set intently, the chin a little forward, the eyes hard.

"The thing is simply this," Billy answered, beaming. "The late Mr. Abernethy, on account of the lack of the letter K in the musical notation, was compelled to resort to an expedient. He could not indicate the word 'Lake' on his cipher, since he was without either L or K. He evaded the difficulty by employing the initial letter from a word of direction, Largo, which provided the necessary L, and he got around the lack of the letter K by using the French word for Lake—*lac*. This fragment at the head of the sheet spells for us, 'Bedlac'." He pointed to the phrase again, as he concluded.

"So, we have only to do a bit of translating from the French *lac* into the English lake, and then to amplify by supplying the obvious preposition and article, and the writing declares clearly: 'The Bed of the Lake.' It now remains for us to study this page until we learn just where under the water of the lake out there the gold is lying. Somewhere, somehow, this music tells!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE EPISODE OF THE LAUNCH

THE clue discovered by Billy Walker was accepted without hesitation. No secret was made of the information thus obtained as the first progress in the search for the gold, and an air of excitement prevailed in and about the cottage. Jake, especially, was all agog with interest in the new development, and took an active part in the subsequent operations, since the four friends now spent much of their time on the water, hoping by some fortunate chance to come on a suggestion for further guidance. They went cruising out of sheer desperation, having no precise idea to follow until more should be learned from the manuscript. All pinned their faith to the music left by the miser. Each spent hours in study of the scrawled notes in the quest of added discovery, but all efforts were futile. Even the redoubtable Billy himself admitted humiliating defeat. Yet, he was in no wise cast down by the failure of the moment. He was sure of ultimate victory for the orderly processes of reason. Roy, on the other hand, retained his confidence in the final revelation that had been foretold by his industrious sixth sense, and David shared this optimistic trust in the occult. As for Saxe, when day after day passed without a hint of new knowledge concerning the gold, he might easily have become hopeless, had it not been for the diversion of interest offered by his love-affair. For now the manner of Margaret West toward him was such that sometimes he dared believe it possible to win her.

May Thurston was assured by the continued absence of Masters that he had abandoned further vicious effort. In this view, the girl did the indefatigable scoundrel less than justice. As a matter of fact, the engineer was very busy indeed. He had kept away from the cottage because he feared that May might have guessed his agency in the

attack directed against Saxe, although he had taken the precaution to remove the rifle and its accessories from the sapling on the day after the shooting. He suspected, too, that May would learn from Margaret the truth concerning his treachery in love—in which suspicion he was quite wrong—and he deemed himself safer out of the injured girl's sight. So, he kept himself hidden from the household of the cottage, while still devoting himself to malevolent schemes. Hope developed in him that he might yet win Margaret West—if only Saxe were out of the path. In addition, the removal of this rival would allow him another chance, even if brief, to search for the treasure. He was determined that Saxe should die, straightway. To that consummation, he set himself with cold-blooded ingenuity.

It was on a splendid morning a week later that the four friends were taking another trip in the motor-boat, to examine the extreme northern end of the lake. Jake was at the steering-wheel, as always, for the abundant sunken rocks and shoals forbade a stranger as pilot in these waters. Roy sat beside the boatman, as his custom was, while Saxe and David were in chairs behind, and Billy, puffing his black cigar, lounged contentedly in the stern.

Saxe shook his head impatiently, as the smell of gasoline, instead of the balsamic fragrance of the shore, afflicted his nostrils. He spoke of the annoyance to David, who agreed that the scent was unusually strong in the boat that day.

"Must be a bit of a leak somewhere," David vouchsafed. He called a question to Roy, who merely shook his head by way of answer. "They wouldn't get the smell up there, anyhow," David continued, to Saxe. "You see, it's floating round in the bilge right under us, so that we get the worst of it."

Saxe had just time to wonder, without much real concern, whether or not it were quite prudent of Billy to be smoking where so large a quantity of gasoline was loose—then, the catastrophe came—came with lightning swiftness—a huge burst of flame enveloped them.

In that first second of horror, common instinct driving, the five men plunged into the lake. The motor-boat sped on, the engines still throbbing. Saxe, as he rose from the leap, and tossed his head to clear the water from his eyes, chanced to be facing in its direction, and could see only a swirling mass of flames, darting onward toward the shore. Then, a cry startled him to concern over his companions. He turned quickly, and, to his relief, saw four heads appearing above the water. In the same instant, relief yielded to fear, for one of them vanished below the surface. It was David.

Saxe, who was a practised swimmer, shot forward to the rescue in a powerful racing stroke. As he raised his head from the water a moment later, horror gripped him anew—now, only two heads were showing. Billy had disappeared. But his emotion changed to delight as he covered the short distance between him and the place where David had sunk, for suddenly two heads rose above the water. He saw David supported in the arms of Billy, who was treading water in a lazy fashion all his own.

That was the end of the actual peril. Saxe aided David on the side opposite Billy, and the two had no difficulty, since David, though unable to swim, retained his coolness, leaving himself limp to the control of his rescuers. The land was less than a hundred yards away, and thither the five wrecked men went, and clambered out upon the shore, bedraggled, dripping, scorched, half-angry, half-dazed by the suddenness of it all, but wholly thankful for their escape from the dual dangers of fire and flood. The chief mourner was Jake, who lamented with tears over the loss of the boat he had learned to love.

Presently, the others began to rally Billy Walker on his unsuspected skill in the water.

"When in the world did you ever learn to swim?" Roy demanded. "You didn't know how when you were in the university."

"No such thing!" Billy retorted, huffily. "I could swim before I was seven years old."

"But you never did swim during all the time I've known you," Saxe exclaimed, astounded by the revelation.

"Certainly not!" was the crisp reply. "Why should I? Each person has just so much energy to draw on for his use, for all purposes whatever. I don't fritter my energy away on trifles, like swimming for mere amusement. I prefer to employ my vital forces in intellectual pursuits." He paused to grin maliciously at the others. "That's where I differ from you chaps—yes! But, when the occasion arises, why, then I swim."

Roy and Jake made a trip to the ruins of the motor-boat, which had beached itself on the north shore, a quarter of a mile to the east of the point reached by the men. Meantime, the three others started at a leisurely pace to the west, skirting the shore until they rounded the lake, and turned to the south on their way to the cottage. Their rate of progress was so slow that within a half-hour Roy and Jake rejoined them, and with this completion of their number the speed was quickened. It was a full five miles to the cottage, but the sun and the breeze soon dried their clothing; the paths by which Jake led them wound through charming forest stretches; they were happy anew over the gracious gift of life. So, they swung forward with free footsteps through the miles. Even Billy Walker, who ordinarily would groan if required to stroll the distance from the cottage to the boat-house, seemed for once to have put off lethargy, for he marched at the head of the procession with Jake, and set the pace smartly.

The full significance of the disaster was not revealed until the afternoon of the next day, when Jake returned from a second inspection of the wreck. His round, wizened face displayed evidences of excitement, and his tiny eyes were snapping, as he rushed into the presence of the four friends, who were taking their ease on the landing-stage of the boat-house.

"I found out somethin'!" he announced. There was a note of savageness in his voice that puzzled the hearers. "I been up to see the *Shirtso*, and I found out somethin'!" He stared with gloomy eyes

at Roy. "I found out what caused that-thar leak o' gas. The feed pipe was cut!"

"You mean—" Roy questioned, tensely.

"The feed pipe was cut," Jake repeated, There was rage in his voice now. "And somebody done it a-purpose—cuss 'm!"

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